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Outdoor Learning: a many splendoured thing

It's hard to keep up with the many names under which outdoor learning is developing at the moment – forest schools, learning outside the classroom (LOtC), bushcraft, adventure learning, outdoor therapy, etc. It is sometimes easy to forget that the term 'outdoor learning' was only developed 12 years ago in the process of forming the Institute for Outdoor Learning as the national body, after heated debates about the alternatives.

■ Old Ways ■

When I began my career in the 1970s the debates raging then were about whether 'outdoor education', as it was then called, was a subject or a method. The arguments for it being a subject were based on the notion that only as a subject could it establish a place for itself in the curriculum. Understood as a subject the best it ever managed, in England at least, was a column in the PE curriculum as 'adventurous activities' which quickly moved from compulsory to optional status. It has done better elsewhere. At the time other terms vied for recognition; for example 'environmental education', more readily understood as a subject, and 'adventure education' perhaps attempting to rescue a holistic approach to personal development from a concept drifting towards becoming merely a method.

■ New Trends ■

Twenty years ago two events moved the goal posts. The Lyme Bay accident and the introduction of the National Curriculum saw secondary schools moving away from outdoor residential in large numbers. Primary schools were quick to step into the breach. Often with a project based approach, outdoor education flourished as a method of teaching all manner of topics and subjects as well as providing a means to cover the wider aspects of the PSHE curriculum. Forest Schools as an approach and LOtC as a campaign



by Chris Loynes

began and continue to flourish so that the majority of primary schools can now claim to have some form of LOtC taking place, often extensively.

These trends have led outdoor educators (it does not seem possible to call ourselves 'outdoor learners' as a professional title!) to become confused over what is and what is not outdoor learning. Some hanker after 'the old ways'. Others wonder what core knowledge and skills, if any, define an outdoor educator. Yet more argue who should or should not use the term to describe themselves. In the meantime outdoor practices continue to grow and diversify!

■ Learning by Doing or Experiential Education? ■

I think Jay Roberts' recent book, 'Beyond Learning by Doing' can help us with this current question of identity.



He makes a critical distinction between 'learning by doing' and 'experiential education'. 'Learning by doing', he suggests, is a process that applies to active ways of imparting and developing knowledge and skills. This, he points out, can occur informally in everyday life or be used as an approach to teaching and learning in education, teaching maths actively in the school grounds for example. On the other



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These definitions can help us with some recent arguments that challenged outdoor courses to consider their approach by asking the question whether they should be better understood as outdoor recreation or outdoor education (Geoff Cooper, Horizons article for example). Using Jay Roberts' terminology teaching someone to kayak, navigate or problem solve would be 'learning by doing'. Making a kayak trip drawing on this skill and knowledge would constitute personal development and so come under the 'experiential education' banner. It would be possible, using this approach, to argue that both could be appropriate as forms of education. However, it would be wrong to make false claims simply because both come under the broader umbrella of 'outdoor learning/education'. It's worth noting that Jay Roberts' approach to these concepts would also recognise the learning of skills taking place during a recreational kayaking session as 'learning by doing'

whereas personal development taking place on a recreational kayak trip would not, in his view, be 'experiential education'.

Returning to those lamenting the loss of the 'old ways' of 'outdoor education' I wonder if they are perhaps missing the form of practice some called 'adventure education' and that Jay Roberts might call 'outdoor experiential education'. It does seem that the shift to primary school provision, both in outdoor centres and in the schools themselves, has led to a shift to the form of practice better described as 'learning by doing' – the development of knowledge and skills that meet curriculum targets.

Drawing out the distinctions made by Jay Roberts can be helpful. For one thing it can, as indicated above in the kayaking example, avoid claims being made for an experience that are not intended or even possible.

hand he defines 'experiential education' - crucially in his view education and not learning - as educational interventions that set out to explore personal identity, meaning, purpose and direction in holistic ways that, by their very nature, can only be student centred. He believes that, in this case, 'education' is the right term because, in his view, these programmes can only take place within the framework of an educational context.



Not all outdoor learning is necessarily providing personal development and not all is teaching knowledge and skills. On the other hand it opens the door to developing new initiatives. For example those who might claim that outdoor experiential education only has value for teenagers should meet the six year old I met recently. He was a handful, on the brink of exclusion for persistent difficult and uncontrollable behaviours. I met him a little after the third of a series of outdoor residentials to find an engaged, articulate and sociable boy doing well at school and with the aspiration to join the army. At the weekend he was planning to take his family on a local walk he had researched for Sunday afternoon. This lad had found a new identity in the meaning of the experiences and relationships he had had that made him feel valued and had given him purpose, 'experiential education' in other words.

Or perhaps they should meet the teacher new to working outdoors and on residentials as I wrestled with him to explain why the unstructured social time that was working so well for the children in their development of friendships and speaking and listening skills needed to be structured in to his programme and not out. By making the distinction between 'learning by doing', something some teachers find easier to recognise, value and,

perhaps, manage, from 'experiential education' we were able to recognise the, until then largely hidden benefits of the unstructured aspects of his residential experiences.

Perhaps 'Development Training', a largely Lakeland term, offers an integrated concept, exploring identity, purpose and meaning (development/experiential education) whilst offering skills and knowledge (training/learning by doing) to help the participants make the most of their potential. It is also interesting to note the development of Adventure Learning Schools in Cumbria and the 'return' of traditional outdoor residential programmes for apprentices at Outward Bound Eskdale. The 'old ways' of practice are perhaps making a return, some under new banners, others in their traditional homes!

Outdoor learning is a powerful tool with wide applications to many forms and purposes of education. As Steve Bowles says, it should properly be called 'outdoor educations'. By teasing out the many different practices within the field we can develop more effective programmes to meet the intentions that we have for them and, at the same time, learn to recognise the sometimes critical magic but hidden potential that can all too easily be planned out of our work. ■

NOTES:

1. LOTC is a broad term of which outdoor learning can be thought of as a subset. Here, I am referring to the narrower set of the outdoor forms it takes.

2. Jay Roberts discusses the use of the terms 'learning' and 'education' largely from an American standpoint. This can be confusing. He understands 'learning' in a particular way that denotes the informal learning that takes place in everyday life as opposed to 'education' which he sees as always organised. In the UK we have adopted the term 'learning' to imply something quite different, the supposed student centred rather than teacher focused nature of outdoor experiences of all kinds. Understood in this way 'outdoor learning' is an appropriate umbrella term, although I would take issue with the student centred claims of some of UK practice that his implies.

References

Cooper, G. (2007) Activity Centres or Outdoor Education Centres? Horizons 37
Roberts, J. W. (2012) Beyond Learning by Doing. London, Routledge.



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Dr Chris Loynes lectures at the University of Cumbria. He also consults for universities and experiential education organisations. Recently he has been providing advice to a national project encouraging the more effective use by schools of residential experiences. He is also exploring the application of outdoor, experiential approaches to raising issues of sustainability through non-formal education and adult learning.

Photographs: from the author

